

## MONSANTO'S GM SOYBEAN PATENT NIXED

The European Patent Office today put the brakes on Monsanto's over-the-top corporate greed by revoking its species-wide patent on all genetically modified (GM) soybeans (EP0301749)—a patent unprecedented in its broad scope.

ETC Group, an international civil society organisation based in Canada, won its 13-year legal challenge against Monsanto's species-wide soybean patent when an EPO appeal board ruled that the patent was not new or sufficient (i.e., the invention claimed was not sufficiently described for a skilled person to repeat it).

The patent was vigorously and formally opposed by Monsanto itself until the company purchased the original patent assignee (Agracetus) in 1996. The technology related to the now-revoked patent has been used, along with other patents in the company's portfolio, to corner 90 per cent of the world's GM soybean market.

"It's shameful that it took the European Patent office 13 years to kill Monsanto's immoral patent, which was ultimately revoked on technical grounds. Though we're relieved that the species-wide patent on all genetically modified soybeans—both seeds and plants—was not allowed to stand, the delay of more than a decade



demonstrates just how broken the patent system is. The patent had barely a year to go before expiring!" said Hope Shand, who represented ETC Group in Munich.

"It was particularly satisfying," said Shand, "that Monsanto's own blistering 1994 arguments against the patent were ultimately key in defeating it."

One of Monsanto's top scientists testified in 1994 that the genetic engineering process described in the patent was insufficient to allow a skilled scientist to replicate the procedure—a necessary criterion for patentability.

(Source: ETC Group news release, 3 May 2007, <http://www.etcgroup.org>)

## ARE MOBILE PHONES WIPING OUT OUR BEES?

Scientists are putting forward the theory that radiation given off by mobile phones and other high-tech gadgets is a possible answer to one of the more bizarre mysteries ever to happen in the natural world: the abrupt disappearance of bees.

In mid-April, some bee-keepers in Britain reported that the phenomenon—which started in the USA, then spread to continental Europe—was hitting them as well.

The theory is that radiation from mobile phones interferes with bees' navigation systems, preventing the bees from finding their way back to their hives.

Improbable as it may seem, there is now evidence to back this up.

What is referred to as Colony Collapse Disorder (CCD) occurs when a hive's inhabitants suddenly disappear, leaving only the queen, eggs and a few immature workers. The vanished bees are never found. Parasites, wildlife and other bees, which normally raid the honey and pollen left behind when a colony dies, refuse to go anywhere near the abandoned hives.

The alarm was first sounded in the USA last autumn, and CCD has now hit half of all American states. The West Coast is thought to have lost 60 per cent of its commercial bee population, with 70 per cent missing on the East Coast. CCD has since spread to Germany, Switzerland, Spain, Portugal, Italy and Greece.

The implications of the spread are alarming. Most of the world's crops depend on pollination by bees. Albert Einstein once said that if the bees disappeared, "man would have only four years of life left".

No one knows why it is happening. Theories involving mites, pesticides, global warming and GM crops have been proposed, but all have drawbacks.

German research has long shown that bees' behaviour changes near power lines. Now a limited study at Landau University has found that bees refuse to return to their hive when mobile phones are placed nearby. Dr Jochen Kuhn, who carried it out, said this could provide a "hint" to a possible cause.

(Source: The Independent, UK, 15 April 2007, <http://www.independent.co.uk>)



## DO OCEAN CURRENTS CAUSE GLOBAL WARMING?

Hurricane forecaster William Gray claims that global ocean currents, not human-produced carbon dioxide emissions, are responsible for global warming, and that the Earth may begin to cool on its own in five to 10 years' time.

Gray, a Colorado State University researcher best known for his annual forecasts of hurricanes along the US Atlantic coast, also said that increasing levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere won't produce more or stronger hurricanes.

He said that during the past 40 years, the number of major hurricanes making landfall on the US Atlantic coast has declined compared with the previous 40 years, even though carbon dioxide levels have risen.

Gray complained that politics and research into global warming have created "almost an industry" that has unfairly frightened the public and overwhelmed dissenting voices.

He said research arguing that humans are causing global warming is based on unreliable computer models that cannot possibly take into account the hundreds of factors that influence the weather.

Gray said ocean circulation patterns are behind a decades-long warming cycle. He has argued previously that the strength of these patterns can affect how much cold water rises to the surface, which in turn affects how warm or cold the atmosphere is. (Source: by Dan Elliott, Associated Press, 28 April 2007)

## WHERE HAVE ALL THE TV VIEWERS GONE?

A startling number of Americans drifted away from television over the few two months. More than 2.5 million fewer people were watching ABC, CBS, NBC and Fox than at the same time last year, statistics show.

Everyone has a theory to explain the plummeting ratings: early daylight savings time, more re-runs, bad shows, more shows being recorded or downloaded or streamed.

The networks argue that viewership is changing, not necessarily declining.

The viewer plunge couldn't have come at a worse time for the networks: next week they will showcase their fall schedules to advertisers in the annual "up front" presentations.

(Source: AP, 9 May 2007)

## AUSTRALIA'S MEDIA UNITE ON FREE SPEECH

Australia's largest newspaper, television and radio companies have set aside their traditional rivalries to unite behind a new public campaign, "Australia's Right to Know", designed to protect free speech.

Fairfax Media (publisher of the *Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*), News Ltd (the *Australian*), FreeTV (representing free-to-air television networks, the ABC and SBS) and commercial radio broadcasters will argue that free speech is being eroded through more than 500 Federal and State laws and regulations.

The media organisations believe some restrictions interfere with journalists' abilities to report issues and events accurately.

A landmark Freedom of Information (FoI) case, brought to the High Court by the *Australian* newspaper, was lost in 2006, prompting calls for a significant overhaul of FoI laws to better protect the public interest.

Media outlets are concerned that whistleblowers and others prepared to reveal sensitive government material in the public interest are not adequately protected, nor are the journalists who report the material.

Legal academics have been critical of the FoI laws, and international studies have shown that Australia ranks poorly on press freedom compared with other developed countries.

(Source: The Age, Melbourne, 10 May 2007, <http://www.theage.com.au>)

## COURT ACQUITS PAN PHARMACEUTICALS BOSS

The Australian Democrats have called for the Howard government to apologise following the acquittal of Pan Pharmaceuticals boss Jim Selim in the New South Wales Supreme Court on 18 April. The company, Australia's largest natural health manufacturing base, was forced into administration in May 2003 following the largest pharmaceutical recall in Australia's history.

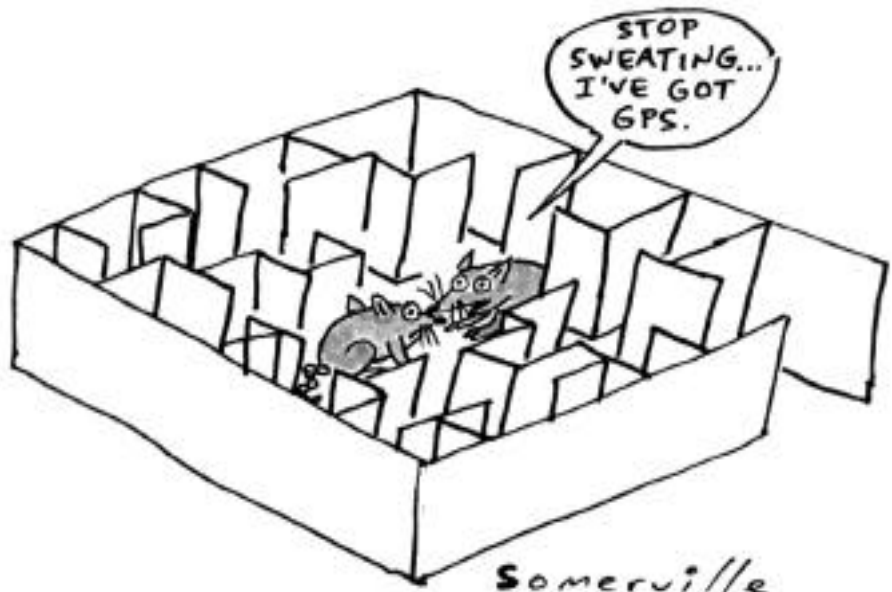
"It was a pointless exercise targeting complementary medicines and it sent hundreds of small businesses broke," said Democrats leader and health spokesperson Senator Lyn Allison. "The Howard government turned its back on the mess and just walked away."

Over 1,500 products were recalled, not because they caused adverse reactions but because of speculation about "inconsistent quality".

Mr Selim was accused of a litany of charges, including breaching his manufacturing licence. In the end, only two counts made it to court and these were thrown out.

"The unprecedented recall had a devastating effect on small businesses and shook public confidence in complementary health," Senator Allison said. "The very least those who have suffered deserve an apology."

(Source: Australian Democrats press release, 18 April 2007, <http://www.democrats.org.au>; Alliance for Health Freedom Australia, <http://www.ahf-au.org>)



## SPYCHIPS: COMBINING EAS TAGS WITH RFID

To Dr Katherine Albrecht, founder of CASPIAN Consumer Privacy and co-author of *Spychips*, our worst consumer privacy nightmare is for anti-theft tags (known in the industry as "EAS" tags) some day to be combined with individually trackable RFID chips and slipped into consumer products. Well, those tags are now here.

Checkpoint Systems has unveiled the Evolve product family of labels, which marries RFID technology with Checkpoint's electronic article surveillance (EAS) technology. Checkpoint developed the dual-purpose labels to offer its retail customers a means of leveraging RFID tools for in-store inventory visibility while continuing to use the EAS tags as a theft deterrent.

The Evolve labels contain a Checkpoint 8.2 MHz radio frequency (RF) EAS inlay, which does not contain a microprocessor or carry a unique ID. The inlay is designed to trigger an alarm if passed through an EAS reader stationed around store exits, unless first deactivated at the point of purchase. The labels also contain an 850–950 MHz EPC Gen 2 RFID inlay, to which an EPC can be encoded to identify and track individual products.

The initial Evolve tag design, the Evolve 410, involves the placement of an EAS antenna around the RFID inlay, containing an Impinj Monza chip on an adhesive paper substrate. The labels are slightly less than two inches (5.1 cm) square, enabling it to be attached to most hang-tags for apparel and footwear products.

Dr Albrecht says: "This will be a consumer privacy nightmare—and no one will even know it's happening. That's because industry lobbyists have prevented RFID labeling legislation from passing anywhere in the nation. There is no requirement that retailers or manufacturers tell us when they're hiding RFID tags in our clothes, shoes, books, or anything else."

(Source: CASPIAN news release, 29 April 2007, <http://www.spychips.com>; RFID Journal, 27 April 2007, <http://www.rfidjournal.com/article/articleview/3280/>)

## SOY MILK IS DANGEROUS FOR BABIES

The murder conviction in Atlanta, USA, of vegan parents whose six-week-old baby died of starvation underscores the dangers of vegan ideology to infants. To supplement the mother's inadequate supply of breastmilk, the parents had fed their son soy milk and apple juice. The baby was only 3.5 pounds when he died of starvation in April 2004.

"Soy milk should never be given to infants in place of formula," says Kaayla T. Daniel, PhD, author of *The Whole Soy Story: The Dark Side of America's Favorite Health Food*.

"In 1990, the FDA issued a warning about the use of soy milk for infants, stating that it is 'grossly lacking in the nutrients needed for infants', and asked all manufacturers to put warning labels on soy milks so that they would not be used as formula substitutes." Yet most makers of soy milk put warning labels on the package in very tiny print, if at all.

The Atlanta conviction follows two other cases of vegan parents found guilty of the deaths of their babies. Previously, a New York couple was convicted of murder and a Florida couple of manslaughter. Many more babies, however, have been malnourished on soy milk because of their parents' vegan ideology.

"The myth that soy is a health food has led many parents—particularly vegans, who use no animal products—to believe that soy milk is a complete and nourishing food not only for adults but for babies and children. It is not, and severe vitamin, mineral, fatty acid and amino acid deficiencies will occur. That's why supplements are required by law to be added to soy infant formula."

In 2003, the deaths of three Israeli infants from improperly manufactured soy formula led the Israeli Health Ministry to form a 13-member committee of paediatricians, oncologists, toxicologists and other health experts to investigate soy formula and soy foods.

In July 2005, the Ministry issued a health advisory in which it warned that babies should not receive soy formula (except as a last resort) and that children up to age 18 should not eat soy foods or drink soy milk more than once per day to a maximum of three times per week.

The Ministry was concerned about many health issues, including adverse effects on fertility and increased cancer risk. The governments of the UK, Switzerland and New Zealand have also warned that soy infant formula should only be used as a last resort.

And soy milk should never be used at all. (Source: Kaayla T. Daniel, 11 May 2007, <http://www.wholesoystory.com>)

## "BIG BROTHER" MICROPHONES MAY BE LINKED WITH CCTV

Hidden mini-cameras and microphones that can eavesdrop on conversations in the street are the next step in the march towards a "Big Brother" society, British MPs were warned on 1 May.

Richard Thomas, the UK Information Commissioner, said a debate had begun about whether listening devices should be set up alongside Britain's 4.5 million CCTV cameras. In evidence to the Commons Home Affairs Committee, he said he would be hostile to such an idea. He was also alarmed by the prospect of tiny cameras, hidden in lamp posts, replacing more obvious monitors.



Mr Thomas even considered that so-called "talking CCTV", which is to be trialled in 20 areas across the country, might be a "bridge too far". This system allows operators to bellow orders at those deemed to be behaving badly.

He said it was arguable that surveillance in Britain—which is greater than in any other democratic nation—may already have gone too far.

But MPs told Mr Thomas that their constituents were keen on CCTV, which they found reassuring.

(Source: Daily Telegraph, UK, 2 May 2007, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk>)

## NEXT-GENERATION VIDEO GAMES READ BRAIN WAVES

Engineers at NeuroSky Inc. have big plans for brain-wave-reading toys and video games, to make them more mentally stimulating and realistic. The technology could even enable players to control video game characters or avatars in virtual worlds with nothing but their thoughts.

Adding biofeedback to *Tiger Woods PGA Tour*, for instance, could mean that only those players who muster Zen-like concentration could nail a putt. In the popular first-person shooter *Grand Theft Auto*, players who become nervous or frightened will have worse aim than those who remain relaxed and focused.

NeuroSky's prototype measures a person's baseline brain-wave activity, including signals that relate to concentration, relaxation and anxiety.

The technology ranks performance in each category on a scale of one to 100, and the numbers change as a person thinks about relaxing images, focuses intently or gets kicked, interrupted or otherwise distracted.

The technology is similar to more sensitive, expensive equipment that athletes use to achieve peak performance. Koo Hyoung Lee, a NeuroSky co-founder from South Korea, used biofeedback to improve concentration and relaxation techniques for members of his country's Olympic archery team.

Toys with even the most basic brain-wave-reading technology—scheduled for debut later this year—could boost mental focus and help kids with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, autism and mood disorders.

(Source: Associated Press, 30 April 2007, <http://edition.cnn.com/2007/TECH/fun.games/04/30/mind.reading.toys.ap/index.html>)

## IMF AND WORLD BANK FACE DECLINING AUTHORITY AS VENEZUELA ANNOUNCES WITHDRAWAL

Venezuela's decision to pull out of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank will be seen in the United States as just another example of the ongoing feud between Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez and the Bush Administration. But it is likely to be viewed differently in the rest of the world, and could have an impact on both institutions, whose power and legitimacy in developing countries have been waning steadily in recent years.

Other countries may follow. President Rafael Correa of Ecuador announced last week that it was kicking the World Bank's representative out of the country. It was an unprecedented action, which President Correa punctuated by stating that "we will not stand for extortion by this international bureaucracy". In 2005, the World Bank withheld a previously approved US\$100 million loan to Ecuador to try to force the government to use windfall oil revenues for debt repayment, rather than the government's choice of social spending.

This is the way these two institutions have operated for decades. With the IMF as leader and the US Treasury department holding veto power, they have run a "creditors' cartel" that has been able to exert enormous pressure on governments over a wide variety of economic issues. This pressure has not only generated widespread resentment, but has also often led to economic failure in the countries and regions where the IMF and World Bank have had the most influence. Over the last 25 years, Latin America has had its worst long-term economic growth performance in more than a century.

Venezuela also has specific grievances against the IMF, which are likely to generate sympathy in other developing countries with democratic, left-of-centre governments. On 12 April 2002, just hours after Venezuela's democratically elected government was overthrown in a military coup, the IMF stated publicly that it was "ready to assist the new administration [of Pedro Carmona] in whatever manner they find suitable".

This instantaneous show of financial support for a newly installed dictatorship—one which immediately dissolved the country's Constitution, General Assembly and Supreme Court—was unprecedented in the IMF's history. Typically the IMF does not react so quickly, even to an elected government. It is no wonder that this move was seen in Venezuela and elsewhere as an attempt by the IMF to support the coup itself. Washington, which dominates the Fund, had advance knowledge of the coup, supported it and funded some of its leaders, according to US government documents.

In addition, Venezuela has not been happy with the IMF's consistently under-projecting its economic growth in recent years, as the Fund has also done with Argentina. The IMF's forecasts are widely used and can therefore influence investors.

But the resentment against the IMF and the World Bank and demands for change are worldwide. The scandal over Paul Wolfowitz's leadership at the World Bank, which is about to topple the Bank's most unwanted president ever, is just the tip of the iceberg. Last month, the IMF's Independent Evaluation Office stated that since 1999 nearly three-quarters of aid money given to the poor countries of Sub-Saharan Africa is not being spent. Rather, at the IMF's request, it is being used to pay off debt and accumulate reserves. This is a terrible thing to do to some of the poorest countries in the world, which desperately need to spend this money on such pressing needs as the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

Venezuela's decision is likely to strengthen the hand of developing nations within the IMF and the World Bank which are demanding serious reforms. Right now the United States, with less than five per cent of the world's population, has more votes in the IMF than countries representing the majority of the planet. The world's developing countries, which bear the brunt of these institutions' mistakes, have little or no voice in their decision-making. Venezuela's move—and any other countries that follow—will show the IMF and the World Bank that the option of quitting these institutions altogether is a real one.

Whether this will spur reform that can actually change the colonial relationship that these institutions maintain with their borrowers remains to be seen. More likely, they will simply continue to become less relevant to the developing world, as has happened drastically over the last decade.

(Source: by Mark Weisbrot, McClatchy Tribune Information Services, 1 May 2007, <http://ifwatchnet.org/documents/item.shtml?x=64866>)